

HERE BIGYNNECH THE TALE OF THE WIFE OF BATH



UN

THOLDE dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
Hi was this land fulfild of faierye.
The elf queene with hir joly compaignye
Daunced ful ofte in manye a grene mede;
This was the olde opinion, as I rede.
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago;
But now kan no man se none elves mo.

For now the grete charitee and prayres
Of lymytours, and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every stream,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessyng halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes,
This maketh that ther been no faieryes;
for ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Cher walketh now the lymytour hymself,
In undermeles and in morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.
Wommen may go sauflly up and doun;
In every bussh, or under every tree,
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

ND so bifel it, that this kyng Arthour,
Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler,
That on a day cam ridyng fro ryver;
And happed that, allone as she was born,
He saugh a mayde walkyng hym biforn,
Of whiche mayde, anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force he rafte hire maydenhed;
for which oppressioun was swich clamour,
And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour,
That dampned was this knyght for to be deed.

By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed
Paraventure, swich was the statut tho;
But that the queene and othere ladies mo
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace,
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
And yaf hym to the queene al at hir wille,
To chese, whether she wolde hym save or spille.
The queene thanketh the kyng with al hir myght,
And after this thus spak she to the knyght,
Whan that she saugh hir tyme, upon a day:
Thou standest yet, quod she, in swich array,
That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.
I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me
What thyng is it that women moost desiren;
Be war, and keep thy nekke boon from iren.
And if thou kanst nat tellen it anon,
Yet shal I yve thee leve for to gon
A twelfmonth and a day, to seche and leere
An answer suffisant in this mateere;
And suretee wol I han, er that thou pace,
Thy body for to yelden in this place.

WAS this knyght, and sorwefully he
siketh;
But what he may nat do al as hym liketh;
And at the laste, he chees hym for to wende,
And come agayn, right at the yeres ende,
With swich answer as God wolde hym purveye;
And taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye.

HE seketh every hous and every place
Wheras he hopeth for to fynde grace
To lerne, what thyng women loven moost;
But he ne koude arryven in no coost
Wheras he myghte fynde in this mateere
Two creatures accordyng in feere.

SOMME seyde, women loven best
richesse,
Somme seyde, honour, somme seyde,
jolyesse,
Somme, riche array, somme seyden, lust abedde,
And ofte tyme to be wydwe and wedde.
Somme seyde, that oure hertes been moost esed
Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed.

HE gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye,
A man shal wyne us best with flaterye;
And with attendance, and with bisynesse,
Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse.

ND somme seyn, how that we loven best
for to be free, and do right as us lest,
And that no man repreve us of oure vice,
But seye that we be wise, and nothyng nyce;
for trewely ther is noon of us alle,
If any wight wol clawe us on the galle,
That we nil kike, for he seith us sooth.
Assay, and he shal fynde it, that so dooth,
for, be we never so vicious withinne,
We wol been holden wise, and clene of synne.

ND somme seyn, that greet delit han we
for to been holden stable and eek secrete,
And in o purpos stedefastly to dwelle,
And nat biweye thyng that men us telle;
But that tale is nat worth a rake/stele.
Pardee, we women konne nothyng hele;
Witness on Myda; wol ye heere the tale?

WYDE, amonges othere thynges
smale,
Seyde, Myda hadde, under his longe
heres,
Growyng upon his heed, two asses
eres,

The whiche vice he hydde, as he best myghte,
ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,
That, save his wyf, ther wist of it namo.
He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire, that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure.
She swoor him Nay, for al this world to wyne,
She nolde do that vileynye or synne,
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name;
She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.
But natheles, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;
Hir thoughte it swal so soore aboute hir herte,
That nedely som word hire moste asterte;
And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
Doun to a mareys faste by she ran;
Til she came there, her herte was a fyre,
And as a bitore bombleth in the myre,
She leyde hir mouth unto the water doun:

Biweye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,
Quod she, to thee I telle it, and namo,
Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two.
Now is myn herte all hool, now is it oute;
I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute.

ERE may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,
Yet, out it moot, we can no conseil hyde.
The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,
Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere.

HIS knyght, of which my tale is specially,
Whan that he saugh he myghte nat come
therby,
That is to seye, what women loven moost,
Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.
But boon he gooth, he myghte nat sojourne,
The day was come that homward moste he tourne.
And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
In al this care, under a forest/syde,
Wheras he saugh upon a daunce go
Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne;
But certainly, er he came fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf;
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
Agayn the knyght this olde wyf gan ryse,
And seyde: Sire knyght, heerforth ne lith no wey;
Tel me, what that ye seken, by youre fey.
Paraventure it may the bettre be;
Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng, quod she.
My leeve mooder, quod this knyght, certeyn
I nam but deed, but if that I kan seyn
What thyng it is that women moost desire:
Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire.
Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand,
quod she,

The Tale
of the
Wife of
Bath